

Senator
**Betti
Sheldon**

2001 LEGISLATIVE REPORT

September 2001

Dear Neighbor,

What a session! First there were the natural disasters — the earthquake and the drought. Then came the manmade trials — a tough budget battle triggered by worthy but costly voter-approved initiatives, escalating health-care costs and a slowing economy that sapped revenues. Finally, there were the difficult negotiations over a major transportation improvement package, which, in the end, was derailed by House of Representatives and Senate disagreements over how to pay for it.

But there was much good news that came out of the 2001 session:

- **Smaller class sizes.** Studies indicate that children learn better in smaller classes. Recognizing that, the Legislature this session committed more funding so school districts can beef up classroom staffing and provide additional learning opportunities before and after school for our children.
- **Better teacher pay.** Last November, voters overwhelmingly approved an initiative that called for cost-of-living increases for teachers equal to the Puget Sound Regional Consumer Price Index. In keeping with the voters' directive, this session's budget provides a 3.7 percent increase this year. As concerns rise about a pending teacher shortage, we need to do what we can to help ensure we can recruit and retain the best teachers available.
- **Government efficiency.** In the face of voter demands for higher teacher pay, rapidly rising health-care costs and the voter approved spending cap, the Legislature had to reduce some services to balance the budget. In the end, we agreed to a no-new-taxes budget that, among other reductions, cuts by 8,000 the number of people who will be eligible for health insurance through the Basic Health Plan. (However, no one who currently has coverage through the BHP will lose it.)
- **Energy costs.** In an effort to minimize the long-term impact of the energy prices that spiked last fall, the Legislature adopted a number of measures designed to increase supplies, conserve use and help low-income families pay for the suddenly costlier utilities.

In this report, you will find more details about what the Legislature did during the 2001 session. As always, please feel free to contact me about your concerns.

Sincerely,



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For several years, the Legislature has recognized that one way to improve education is to provide our students with smaller classes. That, along with providing tutoring and other before-and after-school programs, promises to boost the chances that all students will meet the state's new higher academic standards. And voters spoke loudly in favor of this approach when they approved Initiative 728 last November. Some of the steps the Legislature took toward these goals include:

- **Reduced class size.** \$85.7 million — on top of the \$393 million required by voters when they passed I-728 — to allow districts to reduce class size and implement before- and after-school learning programs, all-day kindergarten and additional training for educators.
- **Cost-of-living adjustments.** As called for under another education initiative (I-732) approved by voters last

Education: Improving our schools



November, the Legislature budgeted annual salary increases of 3.7 percent for all

state-funded teachers and school staff for this school year.

- **Improved teaching quality.** As more teachers retire and fewer young people go into the profession, the teacher shortage problem needs to be addressed. This session, the Legislature approved several measures designed to attract and retain good teachers.
- **Increased school accountability.** The Senate approved a plan that provides more money for schools with students who need help in meeting the state's more rigorous academic standards. But after weeks of negotiations, the Senate and House were unable to come to an agreement on a final measure. The Legislature did, however, approve the use of \$2.8 million that the superintendent of public instruction may use to help schools with struggling students.

Energy: Making it more affordable, reliable and cleaner

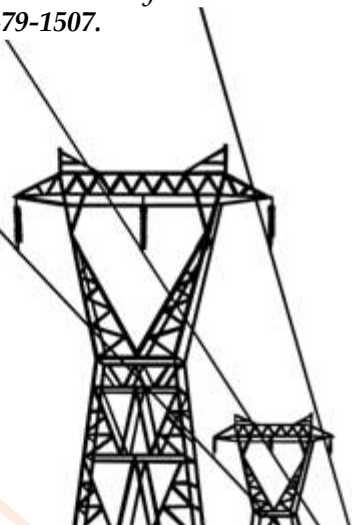
As a state with a long tradition of inexpensive power, courtesy of hydro-electric, the sudden spike last year in electricity and natural gas prices gave our state an unpleasant jolt. Energy shortages on the West Coast and the failure of California's energy deregulation effort had a ripple effect that has put additional pressure on the budgets of Washington's families and small businesses. To alleviate the burdens, the Legislature took these steps:

- **Streamlined siting of energy facilities.** In an effort to bring more power online, the state's permitting process was streamlined. In addition, the

Legislature exempted smaller generators from the energy facility siting process so a number of plants — those producing less than 350 megawatts — can raise their output quickly.

- **Expanded tax incentives for renewable power.** To stimulate the growth of renewable power, such as wind and solar, the Legislature expanded the tax incentives to small-scale operations.
- **"Green" energy sources.** Most utilities will be required to offer consumers the option of purchasing renewable power.
- **Conserving energy in public buildings.** Government buildings and schools now are required to undertake detailed energy-use evaluations, designed to uncover ways to conserve energy and reduce costs.

- **Assisting low-income families.** Low-income customers, particularly seniors on fixed incomes, have been hit pretty hard by surging energy prices. To help folks out, the Legislature approved several measures that could lower bills. *To seek assistance, call your utility first. If they can't help, call Kitsap Community Resources at (360) 479-1507.*



Going into the 2001 session, my top priority was transportation. I wanted to make sure passenger-only service was

preserved; that we enhanced both passenger and auto ferry service by adding more runs; and, finally, that we provide funding for a new run between Kingston and Seattle.

On two separate occasions, I met with Gov. Gary Locke to make sure he understood how critical ferry service is to the quality of life, as well as economic development, in Kitsap.

The good news is that a proposal to eliminate passenger-only ferries was beaten back. As a result, Kitsap will continue to receive the same level of auto and passenger ferry service it now enjoys.

Unfortunately, we will not see any major improvements: No new ferries; no Kingston-to-Seattle run; no expansion of services on existing ferries, and no new Narrows bridge span.

What happened?

Simply put, in the wake of the reduction in the car tab tax to \$30, the state doesn't have sufficient funds to invest in any new transportation projects — unless the Legislature or voters agree on ways to raise additional revenues.

There is broad consensus that our transportation system is becoming a drag on the economy.

- Last year, the **Governor's Blue Ribbon Commission on Transportation** recommended making a major investment in transportation to alleviate traffic congestion.
- A recent study by the **Texas Transportation Institute** found that Puget Sound is the second-most-gridlocked metropolitan area in the nation.
- Both **Bill Gates of Microsoft** and **Phil Condit of Boeing** have said improving our transportation system is critical to whether they expand in Washington.

Transportation: Ferry service maintained, but no major improvements



But the consensus breaks down over how to pay for needed improvements. That's why the Legislature, after months of negotiations, adjourned without coming up with a solution.

Senators — both Republican and Democratic — were ready to act and had the votes to pass a major transportation package. The House, with its 49-49 tie, got bollixed up, largely because House Republicans

and Eastern Washington and other rural legislators were not ready to step up to what is admittedly an

unpleasant task.

But we can't walk away from the transportation mess. It won't go away. Congestion is choking the engine of the state's economy. We can't afford to turn a deaf ear to its sputtering.

Narrows bridge

Talk about exasperating! Three times the Senate passed a bill I supported that would have allowed construction to begin on a new span across the Narrows. But that proposal never even came up for a vote in the House. Why? Because Frank Chopp, House Co-Speaker, opposes private control of public roads. And, as a result of the tie in the House, both he and Co-Speaker Clyde Ballard have the power to kill a bill, and, in this instance, Chopp did just that — singlehandedly.

Update: State health issues

Reducing smoking

Tobacco is the leading cause of preventable death in the United States. It causes more than 8,200 deaths in Washington each year. This session, using funds from the national tobacco settlement negotiated by Attorney General Christine Gregoire, the Legislature voted to continue a comprehensive campaign to reduce smoking among children and adults. In states such as Massachusetts and California, where aggressive anti-smoking programs have been launched, smoking has been reduced considerably, resulting in fewer heart attacks, less cancer and lower health-care costs for the state and all health-care consumers.

Patients Bill of Rights

Although this landmark legislation was passed in 2000, many provisions of the new law went into effect July 1, 2001. Now, nearly everyone will have a new set of rights, including:

- the right to know what's covered and what's not covered in your policy;
- the right to keep your medical information confidential;
- the right to appeal an insurer's denial of coverage to an independent panel of medical experts; and
- the right to hold your insurer accountable in court, just as you can hold a doctor accountable for negligent care.

Thanks to all our pages!

If you know any students between 14 and 16 years of age interested in being a page for a week, please call my office at (360) 786-7644.



Janney Bantog



Kelley Case



Ellen Cogen



Kelsey Eyer



Crystal Lundahl



Amber Manuguid



Shannon McKinley



Cassie Miller-Hart



Joycelyn Pajarillo



Kaitlin Poppe



Ryan Poppe



Jennifer Shuttlesworth



Anna Sperling



Josh Sykes



Wendy Tawressey



Tamara Towe



Sarah Yerkon



Christine Yi

Legislative Report: Local issues

These Kitsap county projects will move forward, thanks to funding provided in the capital construction budget:

- **Kitsap Readiness Center.** \$4.7 million in funding was provided to build a new facility to replace the 60-year-old armory. The new facility will be used to train local military personnel, law enforcement, firefighters and the National Guard so they can effectively respond to any natural or man-made disaster in the Kitsap Peninsula area.
- **Illahee Trust Land.** With funding assistance from the Legislature, the longtime dream of preserving 352 acres of prime forestlands in east Bremerton was realized earlier this year with the completion of an agreement between the state and Kitsap County to create a locally owned park.
- **Olympic College.** The budget includes \$5.1 million to replace the physical plant building.
- **Carpenter Creek near Kingston.** The budget provides \$158,500 for an urban wildlife project.
- **Kitsap County Historical Society Museum.** The budget provides \$70,000 for a Heritage Project at the Bremerton museum.

